

Sapper Thomas Charles Kelly[©]

Regimental number: 387540

1st Siege Company, Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers

born: 1897–died: 22 October 1918

Sapper Thomas Charles Kelly was the eldest child of Thomas Charles Kelly (Sr.) and Catherine Elizabeth, née Keggin. His parents were married on 26 September 1896 in the parish of Malew, Isle of Man,¹ where their son was christened on 21 February 1897.² When he enlisted on 13 April 1915³ Thomas gave his age as 19 years and 3 months, making his birth early in 1896. It is likely that he added a year to his age on enlistment so that he would be eligible to serve overseas; it was restricted to men over the age of 19.⁴ He may also have stood as tall as possible because, according to his medical record, Thomas was only one quarter of an inch taller than the minimum requirement of 5 feet 3 inches.⁵

Thomas's father was a stonemason.⁶ Thomas Sr. and Catherine had five more children: William Ambrose (b. abt. 1898);⁷ Kathleen Margaret (b. abt. 1899);⁸ Arnold Edward (b. abt. 1902);⁹ Doris Elizabeth (b. abt. 1906);¹⁰ and Dennis Keggin (b. abt. 1907).¹¹ According to the 1901 Isle of Man Census the family was living at 38 Mill Street, Castletown (the only town in the parish of Malew)¹² where, at the time, Thomas's father was working as a general labourer.¹³

Thomas enlisted in Douglas, the capital of the island.¹⁴ In his attestation papers Thomas is described as a saddler, more particularly a harness maker. He was appointed immediately to the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers.

The Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers is an unusual unit: tracing its continuous history back to 1539, it is recognized as the oldest still-surviving regiment in the British Army; and, with the Royal Anglesey Royal Engineers, it shares the distinction of twice having the word 'royal' in its formal title.¹⁵

Thomas joined the regiment's 1st Siege Company, which had been on the continent since 1914,¹⁶ at Vlamertinghe,¹⁷ near Ypres in Belgium on 28 October 1915. The company remained at Vlamertinghe until the following August, when it moved 126 km south to Contay, France. From that point on, the company's base of operations moved frequently, often every month or two. The nature of the company's work, e.g. maintaining transportation links (rail and road), water supplies (sinking wells, laying and repairing pipes), communications, and fortifications (building and repairing dugouts, trenches, observation posts and gun emplacements), meant that individuals or groups of men could be deployed to different but nearby locations on a daily or nightly basis as necessary.

Though Thomas was hospitalized in the spring of 1916 and again in the spring of 1917, the company generally didn't suffer a lot of casualties, as it was not part of a front line regiment,. Nevertheless, on 20 October 1918, the company experienced its worst incident of the entire war when an enemy mine with gas shells, described in the casualty report as a booby trap, blew up in one of the billets at Pont-a-Sault. Three other ranks, or ORs (i.e. personnel who are not commissioned officers) died, 10 ORs were wounded, and one officer and 32 ORs were gassed, leaving only six of the detachment unscathed. Thomas was one of the three who died.

Wounded in the face, Thomas died at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station (No. 1 CCCS) on 22 October 1918.¹⁸

A casualty clearing station was a military medical unit behind the front lines, usually located near transportation. Casualties who did not soon die or could not be adequately treated in the clearing station were stabilized before being transported to a field or military hospital.¹⁹

Thomas was buried the next day²⁰ in Plot VIII. B. 19 of the Duisan British Cemetery at Etrun, about 9 km west of Arras. The inscription chosen by his family for the cross that marks his grave reads "Faithful Unto Death."²¹

The first burials in the cemetery took place in March 1917.²²No. 1 CCCS arrived at the beginning of September 1918 and was stationed near Duisans for two months. As a result of the serious and urgent nature of the cases admitted to No. 1 CCCS, the death rate was high in October—a total of 83 deaths occurred during the month.²³

On his death, Thomas's personal belongings, including letters, photos, a pipe and tobacco box, two badges and some coins, were returned to his father.²⁴

Thomas was awarded posthumously the 1914–1915 Star (for service in a theatre of war between 1 January and 31 December 1915), the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre). These medals were irreverently referred to as Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, respectively, after a British strip cartoon of the time.²⁵

No later records could be found regarding members of Thomas's family except that his brother William married Elizabeth Ann Quayle in Arbory, Isle of Man, on 15 April 1944²⁶ and that Thomas's mother died two years later and is buried in Malew.²⁷

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¹ "Isle of Man, Select Marriages, 1849–1911," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly

² "Isle of Man, Select Births and Baptisms, 1821–1911," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly, FHL film number: 454989

³ "UK, British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2020), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly

⁴ "Enlisting into the army," *The Long, Long Trail* (www.longlongtrail.co.uk: accessed 20 June 2022)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "1911 Isle of Man Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly, Registration district: Isle of Man, Registration district number: 635, Sub-registration district: Malew, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 19/2, Household schedule number: 53, Piece: 34651

⁷ "Isle of Man, Select Births and Baptisms, 1821–1911," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for William Ambrose Kelly, FHL film number: 454989

⁸ Ibid., entry for Kathleen Margaret Kelly

⁹ Ibid., entry for Arnold Edward Kelly

¹⁰ Ibid., entry for Doris Elizabeth Kelly

¹¹ Ibid., entry for Dennis Keighan Kelly

¹² "Castletown," *Isle of Man.com* (www.isleofman.com: accessed 20 June 2022)

¹³ "1901 Isle of Man Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly, Registration district: Isle of Man, Sub-registration district: Isle of Man, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 2b, Household schedule number: 50, Piece: 5303, Folio: 115, Page number: 6

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- ¹⁴ "UK, British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military career comes from this source.
- ¹⁵ "Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers," *The Long, Long Trail* (www.longlongtrail.co.uk: accessed 20 June 2022)
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ "1 Royal Monmouth Siege Company Royal Engineers War Diary," *The National Archives* (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/: accessed 13 June 2022), Date: 1914 November–1919 July, Reference: WO 95/244/1. Unless otherwise specified, all information about the battalion's movements and activities comes from this source.
- ¹⁸ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Kelly, T.
- ¹⁹ "Casualty Clearing Station," *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualty_Clearing_Station: accessed 4 July 2022). A very comprehensive description of the casualty clearing stations is presented in the blog "Casualty Clearing Stations During WW1" *Chiddicks Family Tree* (<https://chiddicksfamilytree.com/2021/05/09/casualty-clearing-stations-during-ww1/>: accessed 4 July 2022)
- ²⁰ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Kelly, T.
- ²¹ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Kelly, T., Service No: 387540
- ²² "Duisans British Cemetery, Etrun," *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 4 July 2022)
- ²³ "War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13–1919/03/31," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://data4.collectionscanada.gc.ca/>: accessed 4 July 2022)
- ²⁴ "UK, British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2020), entry for Thomas Charles Kelly
- ²⁵ *Wikipedia* (www.wikipedia.org: accessed 22 June 2022), entry for Pip, Squeak and Wilfred
- ²⁶ "Isle of Man, Marriage Index, 1606–1984," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for William Ambrose Kelly
- ²⁷ "Isle of Man, Burial Index, 1598–2003," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 June 2022), entry for Catherine Elizabeth Kelly